



Wim Wenders: An Interview

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Wim Wenders

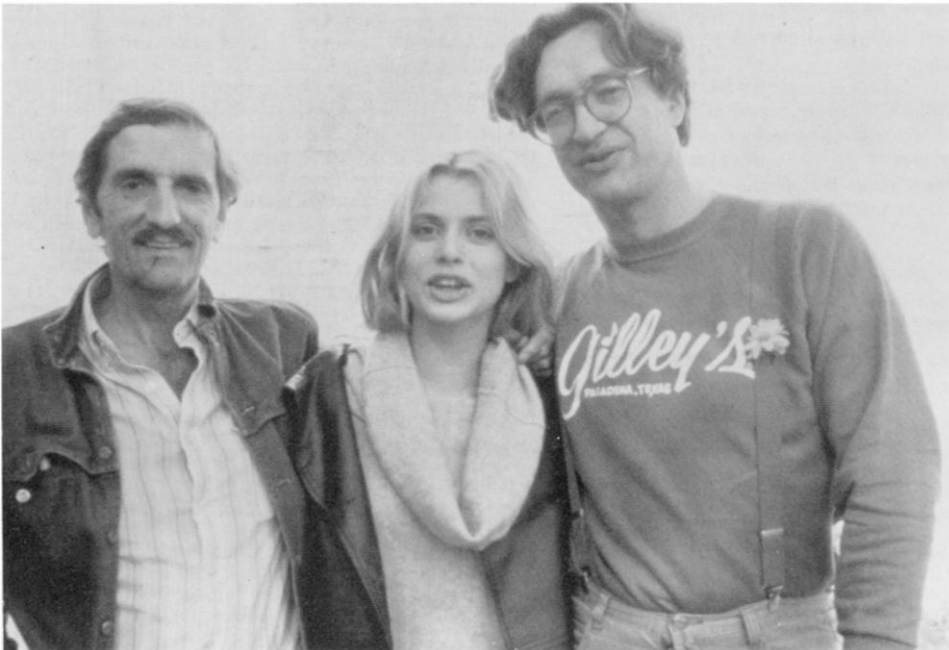
AN INTERVIEW

After ranging over death valleys, desolate highways and the disinterested skyscrapers of Houston, *Paris, Texas* comes to a halt in two tiny rooms of a peepshow palace called The Keyhole Club. There men talk to girls by phone through a one-way mirror. There Travis (Harry Dean Stanton) finds Jane (Nastassja Kinski), the wife he left mysteriously four years before—leaving, too, their young son Hunter (Hunter Carson), who has been cared for in the interim by Travis's stolid brother, Walt (Dean Stockwell) and his wife, Jane (Aurora Clemente). The sprawling roads lead to the claustrophobic cubes of the club—Travis in one, Jane in the other—and through long, wrenching Sam Shepard monologues, they reconstruct the fable of their ruptured love, resolve a violent past and deliver that past over to each other to start anew.

Wim Wenders is inevitably drawn to these metaphors of the false turn and the confining chamber when he speaks of his recent career. After the road-weary successes of *Alice in the Cities*, *The American Friend* and *Kings of*

the Road, Wenders strayed down some suspect paths. There was the much-publicized *Hammett* debacle, Wenders's sole brush with studio control and the domineering vision of Francis Ford Coppola (although at a recent screening of the film Wenders admitted that he now "sort of likes it"). In between *Hammett* shoots Wenders made *The State of Things*, a brooding, meditative "fiction" on what happens to directors and actors stranded by a producer's lie. *The State of Things* perfected the high reflexivity of *Lightning Over Water*, a portrait of dying director Nicholas Ray. And then there was the short that attempted to make sense of it all, *Reverse Angle: NYC 1982*, which depicted Wenders in conference-table struggles with Coppola over control of his "own" images.

Questioning not only his ability to see clearly enough to go on making films, but the capabilities of the international "industry" itself, Wenders shot a documentary in a Cannes hotel room in 1982. *Chambre 666* (premiering January 1985 at New York's Film Forum) fea-



Harry Dean Stanton, Nastassja Kinski, and Wim Wenders while shooting *PARIS, TEXAS*

tures the talking heads of Fassbinder, Herzog, Godard, Antonioni and even Spielberg, among others, pondering the crises of contemporary cinema. The ability to “manifest an immobility” in his films (as Roland Barthes once described Voltairean travel) became a constraining feature in life. Dead end.

How to break out of the box? Collaborate with America’s top-ranking playwright, whose collection of short prose pieces and poems, *Motel Chronicles*, inspired the project. Bring in a musician, Ry Cooder, whose achingly lovely guitar tracks wed themselves effortlessly to cameraman Robby Müller’s imagery. Rethink the career of a starlet. Urge from Stanton his finest performance to date as a shell-shocked mute who grows to the necessity of language and the problematic of love simultaneously. Call on scriptbuster L. M. Kit Carson (father of eight-year-old Hunter) to help shape the script when Shepard gets called to *Country* duty half-way through shooting and an ending has to be decided on. (Last minute credits shuffling has led to speculation that Carson wrote more of *Paris, Texas*’s second half than was originally thought, which is either a compliment to him or an insult depending on how patient you are with the film’s shifted pace and slow wind-down.) While detractors have charged *Paris, Texas* with falling into aimlessness once Travis and Hunter strike out for Los Angeles—leaving Walt, Anne and their plot complication behind—the film is indeed Wenders’s “break-through” (signaled in part by the awarding of the 1984 Camera d’Or Prize at Cannes): he retreats from brooding existential males and self-referential indulgences in favor of a strong narrative that shifts from story to fable, from wry exposition to poignancy. This is not a wrong move.

There is a split in Paris, Texas, perhaps because of Sam Shepard’s departure. Before the father and son leave LA, the tone and even certain episodes are similar to your earlier films. Then the story line and mood change.

The first part is about the two brothers, which is something I’ve done before (not brothers but two men) and which Sam has done before—*True West* is almost that story. We knew we were starting this movie on common, solid ground, but we also knew that the movie

would really happen after this. From our first one-page outline, we knew the movie was Travis and Jane, and we had to take Travis to that point, and *ourselves* to that point, and face a story neither of us had told before. We had to get there slowly. I don’t think there’s a break; at some point in the middle, the movie turns and starts walking on new territory, like in a blank space in the landscape. At least *my* landscape.

You show your characters crying, revealing explicit emotion, which is something quite new. Were you ever frightened of becoming too sentimental?

Sentimentality, of course, is a danger: it’s the other side of emotion, a perversion of emotion, right? I don’t think we crossed that line. I trusted Harry Dean very much in that. Most of my earlier characters were Travis in a way—you could call all of them Travis. Travis is less afraid than those guys. Or more desperate. He knows he has to go further, and I knew I had to go further, and not tell another story of a guy who’s unable to face his emotions, or his love, or his longings. With the two guys in *Kings of the Road*, for example, which is also a movie about love, you feel that’s what they’re longing for and they can’t face it.

Travis is different, though, in that he doesn’t have a veneer of “cool” about him. He has a strong childlike quality, particularly at first, and this seems to allow his relationship with his son to develop. Both are receptive and imaginative.

We chose Harry Dean because he has that in him. He’s one of the few adults I know who is not afraid of that challenge and has kept the child that’s dead in most adults, and certainly a lot of actors, with him. He has an innocence about him, despite a long career and being 58 years old. In *Paris, Texas* he and Hunter change roles: sometimes you find Travis in the position of the child and his son as the adult.

Stanton also has a subliminal violence which remains inarticulated, except in the story he tells Jane about their life together. It’s never shown, only spoken.

He’s said goodbye to that violence. He’s suffered too much himself from that violence. Most men don’t succeed in ever putting a lid on it; a lot of men at some point don’t see their way out of the hole they’re in except to use

violence, especially toward women. In the end Travis realizes he's caused too much pain with his violence and there's no way to say it didn't happen. It happened, he realizes it, and he's missed his chance because of it.

Originally you'd planned to have Walt and Anne follow Travis and Hunter—one of several plot options, another of which, I understand, was to have Nastassja Kinski's character have a terribly mean preacher father, who was going to be played by John Huston. Anne has a maternal and almost condescending attitude toward Travis, which is left suspended. But you'd written a scene where Travis and Anne have a violent confrontation—

She senses from the moment Travis comes in the door that he's endangering the little world she's built up around her. She's accepted Hunter as her son, with all the schizophrenia involved, but four years is a long time to live with a little boy. So Travis is an opponent from the beginning. And she thinks she's found a way out by giving Travis the only clue she has about Jane. Her thought is he'll go and leave everything as it was. The scene we didn't shoot was Anne and Walt following Travis and Hunter and catching up with them in the middle of Arizona. Anne really fights Travis over Hunter, and it's finally stopped by Walt, who realizes it's Hunter's decision to go look for his mother, and accepts it. It was a really beautiful scene, but we had neither the time nor the money to pursue it.

In Peter Handke's Weight of the World there's a fragment written about the time of American Friend which seems to describe a shot in the film, about suicide and gazing into the sky. With Motel Chronicles, there are specific images: the plastic dinosaur, the piece about

the man sitting in a pasture at night midway between Los Angeles and San Francisco, which captures the suspended feeling of the film.

I read *The Weight of the World* at the time of *American Friend* and it's a book you can carry with you, open up to any page, and you have someone to talk to. *Motel Chronicles* is a similar book. There's another piece in *Motel Chronicles* with a guy standing on the side of a highway, looking at his crushed suitcase, trying to figure out if he should keep anything from it, and in the end he just sets fire to the thing and walks straight into the desert. And maybe that's where we started *Paris, Texas*, with that image.

Paris, Texas is kind of a mystery, and seems to follow Peter Wollen's idea about Hitchcockian narratives being quest narratives, propelled by a search for an object or value. The film is specific to Nastassja Kinski and is centered on her practically from the start. With The Goalie's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick, Wrong Move, American Friend, Kings of the Road, there's no such locus and the films are most interested in disorientation. Structure is very apparent here.

That's what made me like the story, the direction from the beginning—a very straight line. For once I was making a movie that wasn't meandering all over the place. That's what Sam brought to this movie of mine as an American writer: forward movement, which is very American in a way. I've always liked that movement and have always found myself incapable of doing it. Even with *American Friend*. I thought, "Great, we have this story by Patricia Highsmith, it's going to take us somewhere." But it never did. It went sideways, all over the place.

Is it because of collaborating with Handke?

It's something very European—or German. So far, yes, it has a lot to do with Peter Handke.

You deliberately contrast the open desert with the populated, LA desert.

Houston is more the opposite image to the desert in the beginning. With *LA* we tried to make it look like any Midwestern city—just nowhere. One thing about *Paris, Texas* from beginning to end—and this was true for each and every shot—was that we never thought of anything we'd seen before.

That seems quite impossible.

Travis and his son Hunter: PARIS, TEXAS



It's possible as an attitude. Of course there's a certain amount of imagery that has passed into the subconscious, and the very second you have a frame and you're shooting, either in the desert or in the city, it would be pretentious to say this is something that hasn't been done before. We always tried to see just what was there and find a way to show it that corresponded to what was in front of us, not some notion of what we were reminded of. I'm talking about avoiding an attitude of quoting, and of knowing you're quoting something.

Wasn't that interrogation of quotation part of your project in Chambre 666?

None of the respondents really answered to that question. I tried to answer it myself with *Paris, Texas*. I knew at the end of *The State of Things* there was no other way out for me. I had to look at what I was trying to tell and tell it without trying at the same time to reflect the way I was telling it. That was the dead end *The State of Things* represented. It was so self-conscious, reflecting its own conditions. You can do that for one film—and I did it very radically with *The State of Things*—but after that there's no point to take it to. Except to say, "Now there's a totally white canvas." Robby [Müller] and I didn't look at a single film, picture or painting for *Paris, Texas*, whereas we looked at Walker Evans before doing *Kings of the Road* and Edward Hopper before doing *American Friend*. I didn't have one book with me, which is rare. We didn't even try to make little drawings the night before shooting.

There's always been an almost clichéd interest on your part in American rock and roll, jukeboxes, pinball. In Paris, Texas that's all absent, replaced by the purity of Ry Cooder's music which draws on American musical idioms.

There was no other music because there was no need for it. Ry did what I was dreaming he could do: combine. In all my other films there was both rock and roll and the score. They complemented each other, but there were these two different levels of music. In *Paris, Texas* there is one, and that one is so much closer to all the images than any music I've worked with before. It's almost as if the music is coming out of these landscapes.

About Nastassja Kinski: in the majority of her roles since Wrong Move [Kinski's first



*Dean Stockwell and Harry Dean Stanton
in PARIS, TEXAS*

film, made with Wenders in 1974] her image seems to have been used. In Paris, Texas it is withheld until the very end of the film—there's that agonizing scene when Travis talks to Jane from his booth and stares at the floor, and we're waiting and waiting for him to look so we can look and see her, too, but he's not looking. Do you feel there's a difficulty in showing her because of the way people perceive her, as a nymphet?

Yes, that's why my first idea for the part was her and why I never had any other idea for it. It has to do with a subtext in the movie, which is a man insisting on a certain image of a woman. And I felt that Nastassja was so right for this movie because people who come to see it will prepare to see an image of her that's been made. In a way they must go through the same thing Travis goes through. That's how the peepshow came up: Travis is sitting in front of a screen, and she's on the screen, or behind it, and is really the object of his imagination. I've followed Nastassja's career and seen her films and some of them were painful to me because I felt there was someone who was trapped. There's a really great actress, and she's totally exploited because of her image. That was also a reason to ask her, because I felt she was waiting to show the other side of that image. And she did.

Chambre 666 is being released soon. What are the problems involved in trying to make "personal" films (your film diary projects, for instance, the one on Ozu) while staking your claim in the market? Paris, Texas has been hyped much more than your other films,

what with the book,* and because of Cannes.

I fought hard to be in the position I'm in now. After the problems of the past few years, I got to the point where the only way out for me was to get a camera, walk down the street and just look at things. For one thing, the narrative has always been such a . . . romantic block, such a *problem*. I started out as a painter and some of that has survived in me. And I've always thought that films—the very thing, movies—have been invented in the first place to witness the twentieth century. I've always been very attracted to documentaries, but have always thought that feature films are in a way the true documents of our time. Especially when they're outrageous fantasies, like, let's say, Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. If somebody 500 years from now happened to find *Vertigo*, they'd have a pretty clear notion of what America looked like in 1958. This is a very important component of film-making: even if a film is sheer fantasy—film is unique because no other form can do that—it's also a document of the time it was made. And I do like straight documentaries a lot. Though it's something of a lost form, because television has taken over so much. But I think it's extremely healthy, a kind of therapy for anyone who tries to tell stories, to go out and have nothing to tell, no story, no fiction, and try to find the right way to represent something. I very much insist that this is part of my work.

Many film-makers who formerly made experimental shorts now want to make features, forsaking the personal form for the feature format. And features are thought of as being exclusive from shorts.

A writer can write novels, like Peter Handke, and at the same time write something like *The Weight of the World*, which is strictly little notes. Or *Motel Chronicles*. It's ridiculous to say, "Now I'm a writer, I only write novels." It's really hilarious that film-makers are constrained that way. Especially with the very term "avant-garde." I don't know what to do with that. *Vertigo* to me is avant-garde; we can forget a lot of what is called "avant-garde" in seeing *Vertigo*, which is really courageous

and daring. A lot of what's called "avant-garde" is gratuitous.

In making Chambre 666, did you feel strongly that film is in jeopardy as an art form? Do you watch MTV, and what do you think of that vulgarization of editing and its effect on film's integrity as a method?

I was badly addicted to MTV when it first went on 24 hours in California a few years ago. MTV happened so necessarily and obviously, no one can do a thing about it. It's nothing but publicity and the whole form of publicity has taken over more and more. It's taken over music from the radio. It's just another step towards a total inflation of imagery, to a point where people lose a feeling of integrity, of truth in images. That's publicity—trying to tell people lies about a product. Godard says that in *666*. Among other things, he says, "In any one-minute ad you're trying to tell people lies about whatever product. It can't be longer than one minute because if it were, people would start feeling they're being told lies. If any attempt to sell a car or cigarettes were ten minutes long, people would certainly no longer buy them."

Kit Carson has said of Paris, Texas that what Travis comes back with from the desert is "the truth," and you seem to agree with that. The categories in the film are clear and there's a strong sense of closure—although Travis is moving out of the last frame. I can't imagine saying one character has "the truth" in any of your other films, that one character brings it to the film, or, as you've said, delivers over truthful love to two other people in a rather absolute way, then leaves. It seems a radical departure.

It was a necessity. It was really necessary for me to get to that point.

Particularly after the experience of making Hammett?

After *Hammett*, *Lightning Over Water*, *The State of Things*.

Do you see those films as leading up to something together?

I couldn't have considered making *Paris, Texas* without any of those dead ends before. Because each and every one of those movies at the end led to a point where you can only return and say "This was not the way out." Each for its own reasons. And all of them were *movies*. It was not like starting with a

*Ecco Press just has published a 500-page book on *Paris, Texas*, complete with full screenplay and sumptuous color plates, for, as the press release puts it, "fans of Sam Shepard, Nastassja Kinski and Wim Wenders."



Jane (Nastassja Kinski) finds that the man on the line is her estranged husband Travis.

different material—it was still a camera and film and an effort to believe in fiction.

Paris, Texas doesn't contain your self in the same way, except for that ironic moment early on when you walk out of the frame. Perhaps that gets back to not wanting to quote. Not wanting to quote yourself.

There is a more overall view which is the situation of movies, of film-making now, in 1984. And of course there is a 60- or 70-year history. I've made quite a number of films that were more concerned with reflecting themselves than reflecting anything that exists apart from movies. And you can call that life, or truth, or whatever. Reality. Doesn't matter. I mean, all those forbidden words. And I see lots of movies and was getting frustrated not only by my own work and the reflexiveness of it but with other movies, too, because it seemed there was no more way out. What-

ever film you went to see, it had its nourishment or its life or its food, its roots, in other movies. In movies. I didn't see anything anymore that was really trying to redefine a relation between life and images made from life. Whatever you go to see these days, you sit there and after some time you realize that you're involved again in something that was born and has been recapitulating an experience that comes from other movies. And I think that's a really serious dead end for something that I love very much, which is movies. And I did my share of that. *Paris, Texas* was—I wouldn't say desperate, because I wasn't so desperate while I was making it—but at the end of *The State of Things*, there was no other choice than to redefine, or find again, or rediscover what this is: to film something that exists, and film something that exists quite apart from movies.